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Jan Amos Komenský

The Spiritual Founder of Modern Masonic Movement

One of the least known historical facts in the field of the modern Masonic movement is that John Amos Comenius (Komenský), well known for his contributions to the rise of modern pedagogy (education), can be also credited for his original contributions to the formulation of its original ideology. To state our thesis briefly, the importance of Comenius to the whole Masonic movement can be appreciated from the fact that his general ideas served James Anderson to compile in 1717 the statutes of Freemasonry¹.

Born on March 28, 1592, Komenský was a Moravian Slovak from Uherský Brod. As a pastor of the Unitas Fratrum, he was exiled from his native country after the Battle of the White Mountain (1620), which brought Bohemia under the rule of the Austrian Emperors. His exile lasted forty-two years. But his life touched the course of history at many points. He is known to us as the great internationalist, a great statesman, a great scientist, a great philosopher, or a great educationist, depending on what our major interests are².

Strangely enough, however, his contributions to the formation of the modern Masonic movement are little noted, except, possibly, in connection with his contribution to the „Invisible college”, which may be considered as a forerunner of the Royal Society of Scientists. Though the “invisible college” never materialized (although its ideas became the ideological base of the Masonic movement in England and thus, also, in America), it was the focal point of Komenský’s interest in science, philosophy, in statesmanship, and a major point in his internationalism and education³.

Many ingenious efforts have been made, even to this day, to prove that the Masonic order originated among the ancient Egyptians, Chaldeans, Hindus, Greeks, or Hebrews, or that its symbols may be traced to primitive societies. Few Masonic scholars accept any of these views, which are almost universally

1 Documentary evidence for the thesis of this paper was gathered from the Masonic documents available in the Grand Masonic Lodge in Prague (Czechoslovakia), especially in the scattered items published in *Svobodný Zednar* (published up to 1938 by the Grand Lodge of Masons in Czechoslovakia up to 1938); see also: Joseph S. Roucek & R. J. Vonka, „Maurerei in der Tschechoslowakei”, *Die Drei Ringe*, V (June 1929), 127–128; Roucek, „Freemasonry in Czechoslovakia”, *The Builder*, XV (Feb. 1929) 45–48; (March, 1929), 79–83; (April, 1929), 111–114, 129; Roucek, „The City of Prague and Bohemian Freemasonry”, *Ibid.*, (September, 1929), 257–260, 286; October, 1929) 289–292; Roucek, „Masonry: Czechoslovakia”, 747–755, in Joseph S. Roucek, Ed., *The Slavonic Encyclopedia* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).

2 See: Joseph Needham, Ed., *The Teacher of Nations: Addresses and Essays in Commemoration of the Visit to England of the Great Czech Educationalist Jan Amos Komensky, Comenius*, (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1942).

3 His Pansophic ideal also became the root of the idea of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

looked upon as the romantic fantasy of wilful archaeologists⁴. It seems certain that all the lodges practicing Masonry on the Continent during the eighteenth century traced their lineage to the British lodges.

The fact remains that modern Masonry dates authentically from the foundations of the Grand Lodge of England on St. John Baptist's Day in 1717 by the Union of four or more pre-existing lodges, which had arisen through the gradual transformation of the guilds of operative Masons into societies of non-Masons, for the promotion of sociability, conviviality and ideas of personal peace, brotherhood, equality, and morality⁵. The premier of Grand Lodge of England, organized June 24, 1717, is the mother of all regular Masonic lodges of the three craft degrees, and, therefore, peculiar interest enters in the landmarks, legends, and authentic narratives pertaining to the British rite itself, as well as in the American rite, the daughter thereof, so to speak. James Anderson (together with John Theophilus Desaguliers) became the architects and authors of the movement known in history as the "The Revival". To Dr. Anderson was intrusted the duty of compiling the "general records and faithful traditions from the beginning of time", and to enable his doing so all the available documents were collected for his use. There were afterwards destroyed. That resulted in irreparable loss. In 1723 the "New Constitutions" were published. This document which literally "lifted" numerous passages from the works of Komenský, completely changed the theory of the institution – from Christian to the adoption of a universal creed based on the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man – so as to admit men of all religions, nationalities, and stations in life.

Modern Masonry arose with the beginnings of rationalism and free thought, when deism and "natural", as opposed to revealed, religions were winning adherents; it harmonized with the new and vital principle of religious toleration in a Europe weary of religious wars but not ready to break with theism or even with orthodox Christianity. Komenský's ideas were in harmony with the new currents or religious and political thought and, above all, with contemporary criticisms of governments and of an absolutist church. Komenský's ideals of religious toleration based on an irreducible minimum of belief, personal and civic morality, liberty, equality, peace, were essentially the ideals of the rapidly growing middle classes. His ideology appealed at once to the aristocrat and to the democrat, to the conservative and to the liberal, to the devotee and to the free thinker, to the rationalist and to the practitioner of magic and esoteric rites, to the love of mystery in myths, symbols and ceremonies, its secrecy and the obscurity of its phraseology. Its insistence on belief in God and immortality, its use of the Bible and its emphasis on moral ideals attracted not only devout Christians but many types of faith in an age of universal intellectual awakening.

The general framework of Komenský's ideas can be understood better when we recall that he was the last Bishop of the Bohemian Brethren.

4 For this "revisionist" viewpoint of Masonic history, cf. R. T. Good, *The Concise History of Freemasonry*, edited by F. J. W. Crowe (New York: rev. ed., 1924); H. L. Haywood and J. E. Craig, *A History of Freemasonry* (New York, 1927); F. H. Hankins, "Masonry", *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. X, pp. 177–184, and the bibliography cited therein.

5 F. H. Hankins, "Masonry", *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. X, pp. 177–184.

The Bohemian Brethren, the *Unitas Fratrum*, also known as the Church of the Moravian Brethren, or the Moravian Church (though the distinction is purely geographical), was a religious community, the story of which offers one of the most interesting chapters in the religious history of Europe⁶. Their principles were grounded on pure and primitive Christianity, and emphasized the doctrine of the original equality of men, and, as a consequence, the precept of the universal fraternal love – reminding us of the principles of Free Masonry, such as:

Adults seeking admission from other evangelical bodies (which in later years meant the Lutherans chiefly) were generally received upon promises of obedience to the pastors, and of willingness to be subject to all the rules regulating the life and conduct of members of the Unity. They were exhorted to renew their vows to lead a holy life, and upon receiving the right hand of fellowship were admitted to all the privileges of the church. Those coming from the papal Church were first admonished to consider well the step they were about to take. If the applicant professed to have carefully considered the question, he was asked to give his reasons for wishing to leave his church and seeking to join another. If in his case these reasons were found satisfactory he was admitted to the call class of beginners, or catechumens, where he might become the better acquainted with the life and doctrines of the church; and the church, in turn, could test his sincerity and piety. Before full admission was granted, the applicant was again questioned concerning his motives in seeking admission to the Unity. Was it because he found the truth of Good, good government, and wholesome discipline among the Brethren? Did he have confidence in their teachings, their discipline, their pastoral oversight, and guidance? Did he accept the full right of the pastor and the officers of the local church to each, warn, admonish, reprove, and in case of need to discipline him? If his answers were found satisfactory, this was the private examination before the pastor and the church officers was followed by a public reception to membership at the next communion. The candidate was again exhorted to steadfastness in following the truth of God to the end, and the pastor, giving the new member the right hand of fellowship in token of obedience to Christ, announced his reception into the church and admission to all its privileges.

In putting their principles into practice, the Brethren very properly began with a gradation of their membership into four classes: the beginners, those growing in grace, the perfect, and the fallen. The perfect were those who had attained to a full knowledge of the things of God and had become so rooted and grounded in Christian faith, love, and hope, that they were capable of enlightening others in it and could be intrusted with oversight over the weaker members. From this class the lay officers of the local church were elected. These included judges, the almoners, the custodians, and the sister elders. Their duties were carefully defined and strictly performed. Some the duties of the lay elders were: they had liberty to visit the home of any member of the church, or to note the conduct of husband, wife, children, and domestics, to correct offenses, and to enjoin family worship both morning and evening: they were expected to prevent all possible offenses and scandals in the church.

6 For additional information, see, for instance, Jan Herben, *John Hus and His Followers* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1926).

If the head of the household lay sick, it was their duty to visit and comfort him, and in cases of emergency to secure provision for the proper support of his widow and orphaned children.

The Unitas Fratrum, as well as Komenský, had not only ideological but also direct connections with the Masonic lodges of the 17th century. At the end of the seventeenth century, and even in the first half of the eighteenth century, there existed in Bohemia a society named "The Fraternity of the Hatchet" (*Hackebruderschaft*). It is possible that this society was a branch of the Bohemian Brethren, similar to the "Friends of the Cross" in Holland. The emblem of the fraternity was a small hatchet, which was always carried by the members. Its motto and order of form of oath was "by the old hatchet" and one of its first rules provided that "no one should be admitted as a member whose helve did not fit the old hatchet". Its chief objective was the exercise of a true, faithful and sincere friendship⁷.

During the continuance of the "Friends of the Cross" in the Netherland, mentioned above, there existed about the same time Lodges of Operative Masons, which, at the end of the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth century, must have united with the "Friends of the Cross", the members of the latter society most probably becoming Accepted Masons much in the same way as happened in England.

Komenský, on the other hand, states in the introduction to his pedagogical work *Methoda Linguarum Novissima*, that he had been a member of a fraternity which accepted religious and political tolerance as its ruling principles, besides promoting science and helping those in need. Numerous members of the British Parliament were also members of this fraternity.

The ideas of Komenský were obviously the outgrowth of his upbringing as a member of the Unity of Bohemian Brethren, as related to his reform aims corresponding to the state of mind of the exiled scholar. His bitter experiences as an exile induced him to seek to join hands not only with theoretical writers but with the architects of the new edifice to be erected on the ruins of the old world. He developed his hopes in his ideology of the pansophy – a term coined for the new scheme according to the current practice of using components of Greek or Latin words – and a scheme to eliminate the religious and international dissensions of the world through scientific research and the universalization of knowledge.

In 1636 Komenský wrote about his plans to Samuel Hartlib, a letter which was printed without the knowledge of the author in the printing room of the Oxford University. Komenský described in this letter his plans to build a Temple of Wisdom, mentions the Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty as threefold to God, Nature, and Art. In the third edition of the second page of the introduction he introduced a well-known Masonic symbol . . . Hartlib, being of foreign extraction and naturalized, assumed the role of a mediator between the English and the continental scholars and was responsible both for the edition of a specimen of Pansophy (*Conatuum Comenianorum Praeludia*) being published in Oxford and for an invitation being sent to Komenský to visit London in 1641⁸.

⁷ Documentary evidence gathered from several issues of *Svobodný Zednář*.

⁸ G. H. Trumbull, *Samuel Hartlib, A Sketch of His Life and His Relations to J. A. Comenius* (London, 1920).

Komenský arrived in England in September, 1641, and left for Holland at the end of June 1642. Soon after his arrival, he was introduced to prominent English divines, scholars, and many others interested in his dream ideas.

While in England, Komenský outlined on several occasions to certain members of the Parliament this schemes of the erection of a Temple of Wisdom or the organization of a body of savants, chiefly theologians, who had adopted as their principle tolerance in religious and political matters and unprejudiced zeal for study. Komenský's English friends published his project in the book *Pansophiæ Prodromus*. This is supposed to be the oldest work in Europe written in the Masonic spirit; the third edition of the book has the title page covered with known Masonic symbols and tools: the plume, the square, the open and closed books, two hidden pillars, one carrying the glove and the other heaven, the compasses and others.

Komenský then proceeded to write another exposition, published in 1668, in the book, *Via Lucis*, dedicated to the members of the Royal Society of Science in London. The book is full of Masonic ideas, having the fundamental principles of Masonry outlined therein. Other works of Komenský contain sections related directly to Masonic philosophy. For instance, the title page of the *Typographeum Vivum* has a graphic reproduction of the plan which contains seven pictures which we can find all the Masonic symbols: the plumb, the compasses, the measure of the horizon, the book of the master, the plan of the Temple, the stone chisel, the hammer, the hip of light, the hive of life (work), the crystal of life on the cube, the symbol of the sun, moon, and the trinity of stars, three stars, five stars, and seven stars⁹.

While living at Elbing, Komenský wrote *Pansophiæ Diatyposis*, which was issued in an English translation in 1651. In the foreward Komenský says:

"We have worked heretofore in secret at the building of the Temple of Wisdom. From the present we will proceed openly. After the example of the Great Architect of the Universe we will prepare a careful register of the necessary details of the work so that we many avoid defects, errors, the loss of time, and vain efforts."

He then describes the Temple of Seven Chambers. Furthermore, he drew up a ladder to demonstrate the infinite possibility of the development of human knowledge. Those acquainted with Masonic terminology will understand Komenský's references to Masonic symbolism. The same applies to *Didactica Opera Omnia*, written in Czech, which has the compasses on the title page and which contains the following passage:

"Education is the work expended on a rough stone and who ever instructs and educates becomes the equal of the Divine Sculptor of human souls. He first rough hews the stone, then squares it, applying his efforts to create from it a prepared stone fit for the construction of the Temple of Divine Wisdom."

The oldest Masonic medals of England, we must note, have their symbols in a way that they appear mere reproductions of the title page of the book (although they are placed in other way – viz., what is on the coin on the right side appears in print on the left side, and the converse).

⁹ For a photographic documentary evidence pertaining to these symbols, see the articles, the author cited in footnote No. 1.

The most important work, from the standpoint of history of Masonry, is *About the Betterment of Human Affairs*, which in 1717 served James Anderson when he compiled the statutes of Masonry; in places Anderson used literary translations of Komenský's work. Here Komenský invited humanity to unite in the building of a new Solomon's Temple as an abode of justice, love, peace, and progress.

It must be admitted that Komenský suffered in no small degree from the prevalent mysticism of the times, that his ideas are not always entirely clear and frequently reappear vague. His ideas often lack a firm philosophical basis, inasmuch as they confound scholastic and humanistic views with realism and empiricism, and vacillate between the Bible and Science; they aim in vain to reconcile them in pansophic attempts. Komenský's ethics are Christian; yet they are also as rational as those of Socrates or Herbart. His was the dilemma of a man standing with one foot in the Middle Ages and the other in the modern age as the protagonist of a new world to come.

While, from one point of view, Komenský's idea of the "Invisible college" was never fulfilled, from another point of view it developed into the principles accepted by the Masonic movement. At any rate, Komenský has become better known for his pansophic ideal which was the basis for the interest in Komenský of the trustees of Harvard College. Within the first five years of the founding of Harvard the trustees endeavored to obtain him as president of their institution. But in the end the chief influence of this great educator upon the mind of America was exerted not only through the liberal traditions of the Masonic lodges of the United States but mainly through his textbook, which were widely used in the colonial grammar schools – as evidenced by the entries of various town meetings that have been preserved. In fact, Komenský is still known to his own generation chiefly as the author of these textbooks, for his interest focused on making the acquisition of the Latin language, which was then the objective of all schools, a pleasurable and successful task. Thus, from another point of view, Komenský by using the language of the study {of things (janua rerum) laid the basis for a greater knowledge of science as well. Komenský was the author of almost one hundred textbooks and treatises on education and gained enduring renown as an educator. Though his influence is chiefly a thing of the past, politically the present situation has created a new appreciation of Komenský an internationalist, an ecclesiastic of wide outlook, and a great leader to the Czech people who contributed through his insight to the advancement of all people. From the standpoint of the influence of Masonry on the history of ideas, Komenský is yet to get proper appreciation. At any rate, the first "Book of Constitutions", drawn up by James Anderson in 1723 on the basis of the existing documents and Komenský's writings and as slightly modified in 1728, still serves to give English Masonry the essential basis in the three degrees of the blue lodge as well as its basic philosophy.

Josef S. Roucek